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THIEVES USE FAKE COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES-LOOK-ALIKE CHECKS TO SCAM VICTIMS OUT OF THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS

As fake check scams proliferate and get more sophisticated in nature, more and more unsuspecting consumers are losing thousands of dollars to this financially harmful scam.

A current scam targeting seniors across Southern California uses fake checks that appear to be from the County of Los Angeles to lure victims into wiring money to thieves in Canada.

One vigilant consumer asked the Los Angeles County Department of the Auditor-Controller to verify the legitimacy of a County check he received. Auditor-Controller staff determined that the check was counterfeit. Further investigation discovered the existence of an elaborate fake check scam.

Here is how the scam works. The victim, usually a senior citizen, receives an official-looking "final notice" claiming to be from "Canada Customs and Revenue Agency." The notice tells the victim that he won a lottery prize, and urges him to call immediately to claim his winnings. When the victim calls, the "official" tells him that he has to pay a customs fee. To reassure the victim, the thief offers to mail him a check, and asks him to deposit the check in his bank account and wire the funds back to claim his prize.

The victim then receives a check that looks like it was issued by the County of Los Angeles. Convinced this is the real thing, the victim deposits the check and wires the money via MoneyGram to British Columbia, Canada. Days later, the victim's bank tells him that the check bounced and he needs to pay the money. The victim, of course, never gets the prize.

Los Angeles County officials say that fake check scams are on the rise. "Recent surveys show that fake check scams rank on the top five consumer scams," said Pastor Herrera, Jr., Director of the County of Los Angeles Department of Consumer Affairs. "Consumers must protect themselves against these scams because once they wire money to thieves it is virtually impossible to get it back."

Herrera offers these tips for consumers to spot and avoid fake check scams:

- **Never wire money to strangers.** There is no reason for someone to pay you by check and ask you to wire back some of the money
- **Fake checks look real.** Even some bank tellers are fooled by some fake checks. However, just because the bank accepts the fake check and releases the funds, it doesn't mean the check is good. It can take weeks for the bank to find out and tell you that the check is bad.
- **You are responsible for fake checks you deposit.** When a fake check bounces, the bank will deduct money from your account or even sue you to recover the funds. If you deposit a check you know is fake, you can be prosecuted.
- **It is very hard to get your money back.** Thieves often live in other countries out of the reach of U.S. authorities. Your best protection is not to send them money no matter what they promise you.
- **If it sounds too good to be true, it is.** Don't believe promises that you won a lottery or drawing you never entered.

Victims and people who need information on fake check scams can call the Department of Consumer Affairs at **800-593-8222**, 500 W. Temple St., Room B-96, Los Angeles, CA 90012, Website: dca.lacounty.gov.